

This article appeared in *The Kansas City Star* on October 14, 2004, and is reprinted below with permission of the author.

A LIFE OUTSIDE THE OFFICE

By Diane Stafford

"Gen X and Gen Y employees are themselves increasingly the children of working mothers and the children of the downsized generation. They know firsthand what it is like to have one or two parents in a work force where work has become increasingly demanding and hectic and many, if not most, have known someone who lost a job due to work force downsizing. They have seen the transition from the notion of relative job security to 'employment at will' where employers are less loyal to employees and assume that the employee is responsible for remaining employable."

From the "Generation and Gender in the Workplace" report by the Families and Work Institute and the American Business Collaboration Elaina Boudreau worked hard to earn a good reputation at her company and was afraid to jeopardize that by asking.

But ask she did. After her second child was born, the 36-year-old global branding and marketing specialist at GE Insurance Solutions in Overland Park, proposed going part time.

"I didn't want anyone to have the wrong impression of me," Boudreau said.

But she decided in favor of family and a better balance between motherhood and work. Fortunately, her employer said yes, allowing her to maintain her responsibility level but work three days a week instead of five.

Would this outcome have been as likely 25 years ago?

Probably not. Conventional wisdom says more workers and employers are putting greater emphasis on work/life balance now than ever before. But quantifying those perceptions has been hard because of the difficulties of finding comparable generational surveys over time. That's why the Families and Work Institute and the American Business Collaboration -- a consortium of eight corporations, including GE -- invested in an analysis of workers' habits and values over the past 25 years. The not-surprising finding:

"It's not your father's workplace anymore," said Stan Smith, an executive with Deloitte & Touche, one of the companies that participated in the study.

Working from the U.S. Department of Labor's "Quality of Employment Survey" and the "National Study of the Changing Work Force," conducted by the Families and Work Institute, researchers overlaid work force assumptions with hard data.

The study, "Generation and Gender in the Workplace" covered 1977 through 2002. As many thought it would, it tracked an attitudinal sea change: Workers from Generation Y and Generation X are less "work-centric" than members of the baby boomer generation.

The study defined the generational age groups as of 2002. Gen Y members were ages 18 through 22; Gen X-ers were ages 23 through 37; boomers were ages 38 through 57, and Matures were 58 and older.

Researchers looked at similar age groupings over the past 25 years to draw comparisons.

Younger workers today, they found, are far less likely to want to move into jobs with more responsibility than were members of the boomer generation when they were younger.

Younger workers, male and female, are more likely to be described as "dual-centric" or "family-centric." Younger male workers, particularly, were more likely to spend more time with their children in 2002 than were older workers when they were young parents of the same age.

Ellen Galinsky, president of the Families and Work Institute, acknowledged that the findings were not surprising but that they were striking. The research "uncover a marked shift in the attitudes of both women and men who are redefining their priorities in life and work," she said.

Along with GE and Deloitte & Touche, six other companies sponsored the study. Abbott Laboratories, Exxon Mobil, IBM, Johnson & Johnson, PricewaterhouseCoopers and Texas Instruments are using the information to help design work/life programs and employee benefits for their workers.

Finding that younger workers are demonstrably less likely to sacrifice family time and make other tradeoffs necessary to move up the corporate ladder is important information for companies concerned about succession planning.

Only 39 percent of the total wage and salaried work force in 2002 wanted jobs with greater responsibility, the report said.

What's more worrisome to companies is that only 43 percent of the "prime candidates for promotion" -- college-educated Gen Y, Gen X and boomer employees -- want to move into jobs with greater responsibility, researchers found. And 80 percent of the "prime candidates" would like to work fewer hours than they currently work.

Young workers today also look at the managers who could be their workplace role models and aren't happy with what they see, largely because it doesn't look as if the older managers are having a very good time.

"As one employer recently put it, the 'bad mood meter' among managers is obvious to those in the pipeline," the report said.

But the fact that Gen X and Gen Y workers aren't as interested in taking on more job responsibilities in no way proved the assumption that the younger workers are "slackers," the researchers said.

"In fact, the study found that Gen Y and Gen X employees in 2002 worked just as hard as their age counterparts did in 1977," researchers found. "Statistically, there is no significant difference between Gen Y in 2002 and their age counterparts in 1977 with respect to the total paid and unpaid hours worked per week (38.5 on average)."

Also, "when Gen X employees in 2002 were compared with the age counterparts in 1977, the study found that in 2002 Gen X employees actually worked more paid and unpaid hours per week (45.6 on average) than employees of comparable ages in 1977 (42.9 on average)."

Some other comparative statistics in the study:

Among married couples with children, mothers in 2002 were spending the same amount of time interacting with their children on days when they worked as they did 25 years ago (3.3 to 3.4 hours a workday), but fathers' time increased dramatically -- from 1.8 to 2.7 hours a workday.

Among college-educated men and women, 21 percent fewer working women and 16 percent fewer working men in 2002 wanted to move into jobs with more responsibility than in 1992 -- a big change in only a decade.

More than half of employees today who want to move ahead in their professions are likely to seek jobs outside their current companies, but 73 percent of employees who want to stay at the same level of responsibility are satisfied staying with their current employers.

Married women spent less time on household chores on days they worked in 2002 than in 1977 (down from 3.3 hours to 2.7 hours) but working men added 42 minutes a day (from 1.22 hours to 1.93 hours a workday) over the same period.

The work force breakdown in 2002 for those aged 18 to 37 was 57 percent men and 43 percent women, probably reflecting women's time off for childbearing and child-raising, whereas workers aged 38 and older were more likely to be women.

"Obviously fathers' increased involvement in family life is affected by the increase in the number of mothers who are employed," the report said, noting that men today are more likely to believe it is appropriate for mothers to share in breadwinning responsibilities.

The study found no statistical change in the opinions of working women about whether they should work or stay home with children.

The complete report on generation and gender may be read at www.familiesandwork.org.

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